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## CHRISTIANS IN THE SASANIAN EMPIRE: A CASE OF DIVIDED LOYALTIES

**I**N THAT much discussed panegyric, the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius tells how the emperor, having heard that there were 'many churches of God in Persia and that large numbers were gathered into the fold of Christ, resolved to extend his concern for the general welfare to that country also, as one whose aim it was to care for all alike in every nation.'<sup>1</sup> He goes on to give what purports to be a letter from Constantine to the Sasanid shah, Shapur II; in this, not only does the emperor neatly explain away his predecessor Valerian's humiliating capture by the Persians in 260 as divine punishment for his persecution of Christians<sup>2</sup> but he presumes to draw a lesson from this for Shapur as well: by protecting his own Christian population Shapur will experience the beneficence of Constantine's Deity.<sup>3</sup>

Eusebius provides us with a useful starting point from two quite different points of view. In the first place, by his general identification of the Roman empire as an *eikon* of the kingdom of God,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Constantini*, GCS, Eusebius I.12, IV.8. Grégoire's thesis that the *Life* is a late fourth-century forgery has not found general favour: see for example H. Chadwick's preface to the second edition of N. H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (London 1972) pp iv–vii; Baynes discusses the Letter to Shapur on pp 26–9.

<sup>2</sup> *Vita Constantini*, IV.11. On the Letter see especially H. Dörries, *AAWG* III.34 (1954) pp 125–7. The argument that persecution brings political disaster (which has its roots in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism) is found applied to the Sasanids in the *Acts of Jacob* (martyred c. 422), *Acta Martyrum et S[anctorum]*, ed P. Bedjan, 4 (Paris/Leipzig 1894) p 196: Jacob tells Bahram II, 'your father Yazdgard ruled the kingdom in peace and well-being for twenty one years and all his enemies everywhere were subjected and friendly to him. This was because he honoured the Christians, he built churches and granted them peace. At the end of his reign, when he turned away from this beneficial policy and became a persecutor of the Christians, spilling the innocent blood of a God-fearing people, you know very well yourself of the extraordinary death he died . . . '.

<sup>3</sup> *Vita Constantini*, IV.13.

<sup>4</sup> On this see R. Farina, *L'impero e l'imperatore cristiano in Eusebio di Cesarea* (Zürich 1966) pp 107–23, 154–65, and F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, 2 (Washington, DC., 1966) pp 614–22.

Eusebius has provided a model for the writing of ecclesiastical history which ignores the presence of a large Christian community outside the confines of the Roman empire, and subject to the Sasanid. Secondly, the emperor's role, portrayed by Eusebius in the passage quoted, as advocate for the Christian minority living under the Zoroastrian Sasanids, was to have an important bearing on relationships between these Christians and their overlords in the ensuing centuries.

Eusebius's picture of the history of the Christian church as being inextricably interwoven with the history of the Roman empire has proved to have had a pernicious influence on the writing of almost all subsequent ecclesiastical history down to our present day:<sup>5</sup> one has only to glance at the contents of the standard handbooks in every European language to observe the insidious effect that the father of church history has had; the very existence of this by no means insignificant Christian church in Sasanid Iran is only given token recognition at the very most. Interestingly enough, the English translation of volume 3 of Flliche-Martin's *Histoire de l'Église* tacitly draws attention to this imbalance by renaming this volume *The Church in the Christian Roman Empire*.

The practical result of this lack of perspective which goes back to the fountain-head of ecclesiastical history is that very poor coverage is given to the church in the Sasanid empire with the result that the interested reader has to resort directly to specialised works on the subject, among which J. Labourt's *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide* still takes pride of place.<sup>6</sup>

The neglect by church historians of this Persian church has also led to a general inattention to a model of church-state relations which, while irrelevant to European Christianity, has always been applicable to several of the oriental churches and which in fact still exists to-day for Christian communities living under Islamic governments. Whereas a great deal has been written on two other patterns of relationship, the state that is openly opposed to and

<sup>5</sup> As far as German works are concerned this was well pointed by P. Kawerau in his inaugural lecture as professor of Ostkirchengeschichte at Marburg, 'Allgemeine Kirchengeschichte und Ostkirchengeschichte', *ZRGG* 14 (1962) pp 305-15.

<sup>6</sup> Paris 1904. Labourt's work is brought up to date in certain respects by J. M. Fiey's useful sketch of the same period, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'église en Iraq*, CSCO 310 (1970). In English the best works available are [W. A.] Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church* (London 1910) and W. G. Young, *Patriarch Shah and Caliph* (Rawalpindi 1974), although neither of these is sufficiently critical.

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persecutes Christianity, and the state that proclaims itself as being Christian, there has been remarkably little study of cases where the state, having an official religion of its own, nevertheless recognises the existence of a Christian minority within its midst.<sup>7</sup>

Eusebius speaks of 'large numbers of Christians' in Persia in the first half of the fourth century, and there are no good grounds for doubting the general correctness of this statement. Certainly by 410, when the synod of Seleucia met under the auspices of the Roman envoy, bishop Marutha of Martyropolis, there were already six metropolitan sees and over thirty bishoprics; by the time of the collapse of the Sasanid dynasty before the Arab armies in the mid seventh century there were ten metropolitan sees (including the patriarchate) and ninety-six bishoprics.<sup>8</sup> In the course of the sixth and seventh centuries several members of the royal family were Christians, as were a number of high officials, such as Chosroes II's doctor, Gabriel of Sinjar, and his chief tax collector Yazdin. When the Arabs took over north Mesopotamia it is likely that the majority of the population were Christian, while in many other areas they would have constituted a sizeable minority.<sup>9</sup>

Although later tradition traces back the origins of the Christianity in Persia to apostolic times, it is not until the fourth century that we have reliable sources in any quantity. A factor of considerable importance for the history of the Persian church at this time was the presence in Sasanid territory of large communities deported from Roman territory in the wars of Shapur I's reign (240–71); amongst these were many Christians who retained their separate identity and hierarchy, alongside that of the native Christians, well into the fifth century when several synods condemn the practice current in several towns of having two bishops, one Greek speaking and the other Syriac. It is possible that even the Zoroastrian authorities gave different names to these two bodies of Christians, calling the native Christians *naṣrāyē* (subsequently taken over into Arabic) and those of western origin *krestyānē*<sup>10</sup> In any case it is certain that the

<sup>7</sup> This provides the starting point for Young's book (p iii).

<sup>8</sup> The detailed information is to be found in *Synodicon Orientale*, ed J. B. Chabot (Paris 1902).

<sup>9</sup> In what is to-day north Iraq conversions to Christianity from Zoroastrianism and paganism continued into the early Islamic period; see M. Morony, 'The effects of the Muslim conquest on the Persian population of Iraq', *Iran* 14 (London 1976) p 54.

<sup>10</sup> See note 21 below.

'captivity', as the deported Christians called themselves, played an important part in the spreading of Christianity within the Sasanid empire. The author of the *Acts of Pusai*, a prominent martyr from the 'captivity' in the mid fourth century, perceptively put it as follows:

Shapur (II) built the city of Karka d-Ladan, brought captives from various places and settled them there. He also had the idea of bringing about thirty families apiece from each of the ethnic groups living in the cities belonging to his realm, and settling them among the deported captives, so that through intermarriage the latter should become tied down by the bonds of family and affection, thus making it less easy for them to slip away gradually in flight and return to the areas from which they had been deported. Such was Shapur's crafty plan, but God in his mercy turned it to good use, for thanks to intermarriage between the deported population and the native pagans, the latter were brought to knowledge of the faith.<sup>11</sup>

The very fact that it was at the shah's winter residence, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, that one particular metropolitan see merged in the early fourth century as possessing some sort of primacy indicates that both church and state were already finding it convenient to communicate through a single spokesman:<sup>12</sup> thus it was to the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Simeon, that Shapur II addressed his demand for a double tax contribution from Christians to help his war effort against Constantius.<sup>13</sup> In the early fifth century it is with Yazdgard I's authorisation that the synod of Seleucia convened (410), and many later synods specifically refer to the shah's initiative in such matters.<sup>14</sup> In the last century of Sasanid rule we

<sup>11</sup> AMS 2 p 209. It should also be recalled that when Jovian ceded Nisibis to the Persians in 363, together with five eastern provinces, this territory would have included many Christians, even though the Christian population of Nisibis itself (among them Ephrem) was compelled to leave, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* XXV.9.

<sup>12</sup> Later, at the Synod of Seleucia (410), Yazdgard himself specifically ordered the subordination of the other bishops to the Catholicos: SO p 26. For the emergence of the see and its authority see W. Macomber, 'The authority of the Catholicos Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 181 (Rome 1968) pp 179–200, and the literature cited on p 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Acts of Simeon*, ed M. Kmosko, *Patrologia Syriaca* 2 (Paris 1907), B 4. The *Acts* survive in two recensions, to which I refer as A and B, employing Kmosko's section numbers.

<sup>14</sup> Zamasp (498–501), for example, summoned a synod to discuss the matter of

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find Chosroes I imposing his own nominee in 552, while in 609 Chosroes II, angered because an earlier synod had passed over his own candidate for patriarch, forbade the election of any further patriarch once the bishops' own choice had died; the ensuing vacancy lasted until Chosroes's own death in 628.

But although Christians constituted a recognized minority religion, there was a darker side, manifested by outbreaks of persecution and martyrdom. Persecution on a large scale was confined to times of war and took place notably under Shapur II (drawn out over some forty years, down to Shapur's death in 379), under Yazdgard I (right at the end of his reign) and Bahram V (c420-2), and under Yazdgard II (c446-8).<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, the widespread nature of these persecutions was due to the suspicion that Christians favoured the enemy.

Other martyrs under the Sasanids were individuals, most of whom were converts of high-born Zoroastrian origin, whose prominence in society led to their denunciation by the Magian clergy and subsequent sentencing to death. Martyrs in this category continue to be found right up to the end of Sasanid rule.<sup>16</sup> What is surprising is, not so much the number of converts from Zoroastrianism who met their end in this way, but the fact that many others appear to have held high office unmolested. It is also interesting to learn that in several cases – most notably in that of the patriarch Aba (†552) – the shah does his best to protect the victim from the zeal of the Zoroastrian clergy; indeed on more than one occasion a shah issued specific orders that Christians were not to be

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marriages (SO p 63), over which complications had arisen owing to the fact that converts from Zoroastrianism carried over with them Zoroastrian marriage customs. The prominence of this topic in the sixth-century synods indicates how central a problem it was at that time; the earliest treatise of canon law, by the Catholicos Aba, is also devoted to this subject.

<sup>15</sup> It is only for these three periods that we have groups of martyrdoms. The most convenient survey of the Persian martyr literature is P. Devos, 'Les martyrs persans à travers leurs actes syriaques', *Atti del Convegno sul Tema: La Persia e il Mondo Greco-Romano*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 363 (Rome 1966) pp 213-25; for the martyrs under Shapur II see G. Wiessner, *Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte I: Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II*, AAWG III.67 (1967), with my review in *JTS*, ns 19 (1968) pp 300-9.

<sup>16</sup> Particularly informative are the lives of Aba, Grigor, Yazidpaneh and Giwargis, in [P.] Bedjan, *Histoire [de Mar-Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens]* (Paris/Leipzig 1895).

molested by Magians.<sup>17</sup> A consequence of this tension between the shah and the Zoroastrian authorities was that martyrdoms were much more apt to occur when a shah had to rely on Magian support for his position.<sup>18</sup> In other cases we hear of death sentences being imposed against the express orders of the shah.<sup>19</sup> A splendid illustration of this religious zeal shown by the Magian clergy is to be found in a nineteen-line inscription<sup>20</sup> put up in the reign of Bahram II (276–93) by Kartir; having listed all the titles accorded to him by Shapur I, Hormizd I and Bahram II, this high-ranking Zoroastrian official proudly records how the Mazdean religion and the Magian caste were now held in great honour throughout the empire, and how the doctrines of Ahriman and the demons had been eliminated: Jews, shamans, Brahmins, *nazarai*, *kristidan*, *zandiks* (Manicheans) and others had all become dejected.<sup>21</sup>

Yet other martyrs met their fate through vandalism of Zoroastrian fire shrines,<sup>22</sup> or through making too many converts (especially if they were of good family),<sup>23</sup> or indeed through palace intrigue—as happened to one of the earliest known martyrs, Candida,<sup>24</sup> a prisoner from Roman territory whose beauty had won her

<sup>17</sup> For an edict of toleration probably under Shapur III see M. L. Chaumont, 'A propos d'un édit de paix religieuse d'époque sassanide', *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à H.-C. Puech* (Paris 1974) pp 71–80. The *Acts of Grigor* (in Bedjan, *Histoire* pp 347–8) states that in the early sixth century Christians were given letters patent ordering that no Magian or pagan should harm them, while the Life of Sabrisho (*ibid* p 306) says that on his election as patriarch (595) Sabrisho persuaded Chosroes II to allow Christians complete freedom of worship, as a result of which many courtiers converted.

<sup>18</sup> Socrates, *HE* VII.18 mentions this specifically in the case of Bahram V; see also J. P. Asmussen, 'Das Christentum in Iran und sein Verhältnis zum Zoroastrismus', *Studia Theologica* 16 (Aarhus 1962) p 10.

<sup>19</sup> There is a good example (under Shapur II) in *AMS* 2 pp 244–6.

<sup>20</sup> A French translation of the Middle Iranian text is given in M. L. Chaumont, 'L'inscription de Kartir à la Ka'abah de Zoroastre', *Journal asiatique* 248 (Paris 1960) pp 339–80.

<sup>21</sup> The precise identity of the *nazarai* and *kristidan* is disputed; I have suggested elsewhere that the former represent the native Christians and the latter the deported Christians of Greek origin: see my 'Some aspects of Greek words in Syriac', *AAWG* III.96 (1975) pp 91–5.

<sup>22</sup> This applies to several martyrs under Yazdgard I and Bahram V; Theodoret, *HE* V.39, relates the story of one of these and comments 'I confess that the destruction of this fire shrine was quite mis-timed'.

<sup>23</sup> The Syrian Orthodox martyr Ahudemmeh (†575) was first arrested after it had been revealed that he had baptised a son of Chosroes I; *PO* 3 pp 33–6. See also n 41.

<sup>24</sup> See S. P. Brock, 'A martyr at the Sasanid court under Vahram II: Candida', *An Bol* 96 (1978) pp 167–81.

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a place in Bahram II's harem; it was only the jealousy of her fellow royal wives that led to her denunciation and presentation with the choice of apostasy or death.

Even before the conversion of Constantine the attitude of the Sasanid authorities to their Christian subjects had to some extent been governed by the course of international politics:<sup>25</sup> Valerian's persecution of Christians in the eastern provinces had led Shapur I to treat the large numbers of Christians included among the populace he deported from Syria in 260 with considerable favour, to such an extent indeed that one chronicler states that they were better off in their captivity than they had been beforehand.<sup>26</sup> The advent of a Christian emperor on the throne of the 'kingdom of the west', however, was to reverse the situation, to the permanent disadvantage of Persian Christians.<sup>27</sup> In particular for the next century and a half the fate of the Christian population in Persia was intimately linked with the course of political relationships between the 'two shoulders of the world' (as the synod of 420 put it):<sup>28</sup> times of war were times when persecution was apt to break out, while political peace meant peace for the church.<sup>29</sup>

Constantine's intervention at the end of his life in newly Christianised Armenia led to the outbreak of hostilities between the two empires. That the war for Constantine had religious overtones seems entirely likely;<sup>30</sup> in any case, it is clear from the words of one of the earliest extant Syriac authors, Aphrahat, writing in or shortly before 337, that at least some Christians living under Sasanid rule were caught up in disloyal expectations and hopes engendered by the appearance of a Christian emperor in the west:

<sup>25</sup> This point is well brought out by [F.] Decret, ['Les conséquences sur le christianisme en Perse de l'affrontement des empires romain et sassanide. De Shapur le à Yazdgard le'], *Recherches Augustiniennes* 14 (Paris 1979) pp 91–152.

<sup>26</sup> *Chronicle of Seert*, *PO* 4 pp 222–3. The *Acts of Simeon* (B 98) state that it was out of special favour towards the 'captivity' that Shapur II exempted the inhabitants of Karka d-Ladan from persecution (though of course several martyrs from other places were brought thither to be put to death).

<sup>27</sup> See especially W. Hage, 'Die oströmische Staatskirche und die Christenheit des Perserreiches', *ZKG* 84 (1973) 174–87.

<sup>28</sup> *SO* p 37.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, *Acts of Pethion* in *AMS* 2 pp 559–60.

<sup>30</sup> See Decret, p 139.

The people of God have received prosperity, and success awaits the man who has been the instrument of that prosperity (Constantine); but disaster threatens the army which has been gathered together by the efforts of a wicked and proud man puffed up with vanity (Shapur) . . . The (Roman) empire will not be conquered, for the hero whose name is Jesus is coming with his power, and his armour will uphold the whole army of the empire.<sup>11</sup>

In the war which ensued Shapur's humiliating loss of his harem to Constantius and his failure to take the border city of Nisibis in 338 would both, no doubt, have encouraged him to find a scapegoat, and Aphrahat's unashamed words suggest that there may well have been an inkling of truth behind the accusations brought by Jews and Manicheans that Shapur's Christian subjects were disloyal or even rebellious.<sup>12</sup> Thus, on being told of Simeon's refusal to levy double taxes from his flock, Shapur exclaims 'Simeon wants to make his followers and his people rebel against my kingdom and convert them into servants of Caesar, their coreligionist'.<sup>13</sup>

This is a theme taken up again by the Zoroastrian authorities at the trial of Peroz, martyred in 422. This man was a wealthy Christian who apostatised and became Zoroastrian under torture, but then repented of his apostasy; Mihrshabur, the Magian official in charge of the case, hoping to get the shah Bahram V to condemn Peroz to death, tells the shah:

From this moment on, my lord, all the Christians (*naṣrāyē*) have rebelled against you: they no longer do your will, they despise your orders, they refuse to worship your gods. If the shah would hear me, let him give orders that the Christians convert from their religion, for they hold the same faith as the Romans, and they are in entire agreement together: should a war interpose between the two empires these Christians will turn out to be defectors from our side in any fighting, and through their playing false they will bring down your power.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Demonstration* 5.1, 24 ed J. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca* 1 (Paris 1894).

<sup>12</sup> Typical are the denunciations of a bishop Abdisho (made by his renegade nephew) to be found in the *Acts of Forty Martyrs*, AMS2, p 333: Abdisho and another priest are alleged to harbour Roman spies and write letters to Caesar about affairs in the orient.

<sup>13</sup> *Acts of Simeon B* 11.

<sup>14</sup> AMS 4 pp 258-9. Even in the mid sixth century the catholicos Aba is suspected by

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Accusations of this sort were clearly commonplace in times of political tension between the two empires, and, if we may believe a hostile source, it was precisely in order to avoid this kind of suspicion that Barsauma, metropolitan of Nisibis, decided to adopt at the synod of Beth Lapat in 484 a christological profession at variance with that then current in the Roman empire: 'unless', he told the shah Peroz, 'the confession of Christians in your territory is made different from that in Greek territory, their affection and loyalty towards you will not be firmly fixed'.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that a foreign power was apt to express interest in a minority, and send gifts to its leaders,<sup>16</sup> was not unnaturally a further source of irritation and dislike, all the more so in that this minority had already made itself abhorrent to all good Zoroastrians by its food, marriage and burial customs.<sup>17</sup> In the *Acts of Simeon* some Jews are represented as pointing out to Shapur II that if he, the king of kings, sends resplendent missives to Caesar, they are received coldly, whereas a puny letter from Simeon is welcomed with both hands and its contents quickly seen to.<sup>18</sup>

Envoy from the west were particularly apt to show concern for the well-being of the Christian community in Persia. The extended visit of Marutha, bishop of Martyropolis, which culminated in the

Chosroes I of having given support to a rebellion by the shah's son (who was a Christian convert): see Bedjan, *Histoire* pp 264-7.

<sup>15</sup> Barhebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* 3, ed J. B. Abbeloos and T. Lamy (Louvain 1877) col 65.

<sup>16</sup> According to the *Acts of Peroz*, AMS 4, p 256, the Christian community at Seleucia were presented with splendid fittings for their church in 410. Sabrisho, on becoming catholicos in 595, was sent a gold cross containing a relic of the true cross by Maurice (Bedjan, *Histoire* pp 302-3).

<sup>17</sup> Refusal to eat 'blood' (that is, meat ritually slaughtered) is frequently found in the Shapur II martyrodoms. That one's religion could be deduced from eating habits is clear from several later texts: Anahid, a convert martyred under Yazdgard II, 'refused to eat in the presence of her parents in case they saw she was now a Christian' (AMS 2 p 569). Celibacy was abhorrent to Zoroastrians, and the synod of 486, by allowing marriage to all ranks of clergy, was certainly making a concession to this feeling; even so the conflict between Zoroastrian and Christian 'tables of affinity' still remained and brought much trouble, especially in the sixth century as can be seen from the *Life of Aba* (Bedjan, *Histoire* p 235); see also note 14 above. Burial was of course also abhorrent to Zoroastrian sensibilities; Bahram V even had Christians disinterred (AMS 4 p 254). As the nobles and Magians complained to Yazdgard I, Christians 'mock fire and water' and 'they despise our customs in no small way' (AMS 4 p 250).

<sup>18</sup> *Acts of Simeon* A 13.

famous synod of 410 at which the church of the East officially recognised the Council of Nicaea and its canons, is only one of many such embassies. The sort of hopes raised by these western visitors in the minds of the shah's aggrieved subjects can well be seen from the wishful thinking to be found in the embellished story of the converted general, Ma'in, martyr under Shapur II: the Roman envoy arrives to find the convert in the middle of being tortured; alighting from his horse, he kisses the martyr's feet and gives peremptory orders that the man be set free, whereupon he hands over to the shah a letter from Constantine demanding the release of all Christian prisoners; if this is not carried out, all Persian hostages at Constantinople will be put to death.<sup>39</sup> Although this melodramatic scenario might fit reality in the twentieth century, it hardly does in the fourth. Closer to the truth, no doubt, are the activities of western envoys described in two sixth-century martyrdoms of aristocratic lady converts. In the *Acts of Shirin* we are told that the proximity of a Byzantine embassy obliged the Zoroastrian authorities to transfer Shirin hastily from one prison to another in order to avoid their prying eyes.<sup>40</sup> The other heroine, Golinducht (martyred in 591), was a relative of Chosroes I and had been married to a Magian general; she had been converted, significantly enough, by some Christian prisoners of war who had been introduced into her household. On her refusal to revert to Zoroastrianism she is sent to the fortress of 'Oblivion', where she is eventually visited by Aristoboulos, a legate from the emperor Maurice on a peace mission. Aristoboulos had asked for special permission to visit this dreaded fortress so that he might petition the shah for the release of any Christian prisoners there. Discovering Golinducht incarcerated inside, he assures her that he will ask the shah to have her released. 'I will condemn you before the throne of Christ if you do this', retorted the indignant woman. He does not leave totally unrewarded, however, for, besides receiving a prediction of war, he was able to depart with a souvenir of one of her fetters.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> MS Add 12174 fol 392<sup>rv</sup>; on these *Acts* see J. M. Fiey, 'Ma'in, général de Sapor II, confesseur et évêque', *Le Muséon* 84 (Louvain 1971) pp 437–53.

<sup>40</sup> *Acts of Shirin* 17, ed P. Devos, *An Bol* 64 (1946) pp 87–131, with Devos's remarks on pp 101–2.

<sup>41</sup> *Acts of Golinducht* 7, ed G. Garitte, *An Bol* 74 (1956) pp 405–40. According to the Armenian *Life of Abda* (*Vark' ew vgayabanutiwnk' srhoc'* 1 (Venice 1894) p 3) already in the early fifth century Theodosius's ambassadors request Yazgard

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While there is no doubt that the loyalty of some Christians towards the Sasanids really was suspect, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries,<sup>42</sup> at the same time it should be noted that the martyrs are quite often specifically represented as assuring the shah that their political loyalty is genuine. A touching case concerns Gush-tazad, a Christian courtier who apostatised in the persecution and then repented: he insists on sending a last message to Shapur II as he is led off: 'I have always been loyal to you and your father; grant me one request: let a herald proclaim that Gushtazad is being put to death, not for treason, but because he was a Christian who refused to renounce God'.<sup>43</sup>

That this loyalty must often have been entirely genuine can be seen from the fact that many Christians served in the army. In the early sixth century we even hear of a case of a known convert from Zoroastrianism, Grigor, who was appointed general by Cawad during war against the west.<sup>44</sup>

An indication of the extent to which the church in Persia viewed itself, by the mid sixth century, as an integral part of Sasanian society is to be found in some of the epithets accorded to the shah in the *Synodicon*. Thus Chosroes I (who at one point is called 'the second Cyrus')<sup>45</sup> is referred to several times as being 'preserved by divine grace',<sup>46</sup> while at the synod of 576 the following instructions were issued:

It is right that in all the churches of this exalted and glorious kingdom that our lord the victorious Chosroes, king of kings, be named in the litanies during the liturgy. No metropolitan or bishop has any authority to waive this canon in any of the churches of his diocese and jurisdiction.<sup>47</sup>

to release the deacon Benjamin from prison: 'Give me assurance in his own handwriting that he will not convert to his faith any more Magians in Persia', the shah replied; 'if so, at your request I will free him from chains'. This was an undertaking that of course proved unacceptable—even though it was actually written into the terms of Justinian's peace treaty of 561, see A. Guillaumont, 'Justinien et l'église de Perse', *DOP* 23/4 (1969/70) pp 49–50.

<sup>42</sup> Shapur's exemption of the Christians of the 'captivity' at Karka d-Ladan from persecution (see note 26 above) might suggest that he feared their defection.

<sup>43</sup> *Acts of Simeon A* 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Acts of Grigor*, in Bedjan, *Histoire* pp 359–61.

<sup>45</sup> SO p 69.

<sup>46</sup> SO pp 68, 94, 544 (likewise of Hormizd IV, pp 130–1).

<sup>47</sup> SO p 121 (canon 14).

When Arab succeeded Sasanid rule in the mid seventh century it is clear that a reasonably satisfactory *modus vivendi* had been achieved for the church: vandalism of fire shrines, which features predominantly in the fifth century, seems to have become a thing of the past, and it is chiefly conversions among high caste Magians that upset the balance and induce the authorities to act, almost invariably at the instigation of the Zoroastrian clergy. It would appear that most of the rights of, and restrictions laid upon, the 'peoples of the book' under the new Arab rulers were simply formulations of what had already been general practice under the later Sasanids.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in embryo, all the main elements of the Ottoman *millet* system were already present, as far as the Christian community was concerned, in pre-Islamic times.

So far nothing has been said about national identity, and the reason for this is a simple one: such a concept (at least as we now understand it) never existed in Sasanid Iran, any more than it did in the Ottoman empire before the rise of nationalism. Across the border in the Roman empire, it is true, one can occasionally find a non-Chalcedonian writer like Jacob of Serugh (†521) speaking of 'us Rhomaioi',<sup>49</sup> but this is only possible because the state is a Christian one. For Christians in Persia, on the other hand, their 'nation' was that of their religious community. As Wigram put it, 'religion is the determinant of nationality'.<sup>50</sup> The situation is indeed very similar to that of the Jewish religious community, another *ethnos* which spanned two political empires, though of course in their case they suffered the same sort of disabilities in both empires. These two religious communities consisted of individuals of very diverse racial and geographic origins, the Christian even more so than the Jewish; both communities nevertheless called themselves a 'People' or 'Nation' (Syriac '*amma*', corresponding to both *ethnos* (singular) and *laos*).

A very prominent theme among all early Syriac writers, borrowing here from the Jewish conceptual model, is that of the new

<sup>48</sup> See E. Sachau, 'Von den rechtlichen Verhältnissen der Christen im Sasanidenreich', *Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen* X.2 (Berlin 1907) pp 69–95.

<sup>49</sup> *Epistulae*, ed G. Olinder, CSCO 110 (1937) p 92.

<sup>50</sup> Wigram, *An Introduction* p 66; similarly M. Morony, 'Religious communities in late Sasanian and early Muslim Iraq', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17 (Leiden 1974) pp 113–35. Morony sees this as a development of the late Sasanian period in particular.

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'People' (or 'Nation') who emerge from the (gentile) 'Peoples' (or, from the Jewish 'People' and the gentile 'Peoples').<sup>51</sup> The theme is furthermore developed by the introduction of bridal imagery: the betrothed bride was originally the Jewish People, but when she eventually rejected the Bridegroom at his appearance, her place was taken by a new bride, the church, a new People drawn from both Jews and gentiles. As we shall see shortly, this bridal imagery is given some interesting extensions in the Persian context.

Now in both the acts of the earliest synod (410) and in a variety of other texts produced by Christians in Sasanid Iran it is significant that one of the standard forms of self-identification is precisely the biblical term 'People of God': Aphrahat already uses the terminology in the mid fourth century,<sup>52</sup> while in the synod of 410 it is laid down that anyone who disregards its canons is to be anathematised by the 'People of God'.<sup>53</sup> Several hagiographers also employ the phrase; one, for example, complains 'how can we sufficiently tell of all that the shah caused the People of God to endure?'.<sup>54</sup> Related terms are likewise found, such as 'People and Church of God',<sup>55</sup> while later variations on this are 'People of the Christians',<sup>56</sup> 'People of the believers'<sup>57</sup> or 'People of Christendom'.<sup>58</sup> The world is divided, not between *Rhomāyē* and *Persāyē*, but between the 'People of God' and those outside, *barrāyē* (or, less frequently, 'pagans' *hanpē*).<sup>59</sup>

Just as Syriac monastic literature speaks of two co-existent modes of being and experience, that of the spiritual world (*rūhānūtā*) and that of the physical (*pagrānūtā*), both at tension with each other but of which the former alone is of true significance, so

<sup>51</sup> See R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge 1975) pp 41–68; this is the topic of Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 16 (English translation in J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism* (Leiden 1971) pp 60–7).

<sup>52</sup> *Demonstration* 5.1 and 25; 14.1.

<sup>53</sup> SO p 21; the term occurs elsewhere too in the *acta* of this synod. The Greek equivalent, *laos tou theou* is found several times in Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* (II.63; IV.62.3; IV.71.2); for the use of the term within the Roman empire see E. von Ivanka, *Rhomäerreich und Gottesvolk* (Freiburg/München 1968) pp 49–61. Similarly of Jewish origin is the word *knushātā* (lit. 'synagogues') employed for Christian communities (SO pp 26, 37).

<sup>54</sup> AMS 4 p 257; for some other references see my note in *An Bol* 96 (1978) p 180.

<sup>55</sup> SO p 22.

<sup>56</sup> SO pp 50, 131; *Acts of Simeon* B 11.

<sup>57</sup> SO p 65.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid* p 544.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* pp 49, 56, 77, 96, 98–9 and often; 'pagans': *Ibid* pp 117, 127 etc.

in the Persian church (and above all in the martyr acts) we can observe a similar tension expressed between two modes of allegiance: the Persian Christian was servant of two different shahanshahs, Christ and the temporal shah. Under normal conditions there was not necessarily any clash of loyalties since membership of the 'People of God' and of the Persian state belonged to separate modes of existence and so were not exclusive of each other. Trouble arose only when matters became polarised and one side or other asserted that loyalty to the one conflicted with, and was detrimental to, loyalty to the other, a situation illustrated by the following dialogue between Pusai, the shah's chief craftsman, and Shapur II:

Pusai: Far be it from a servant of the living God to consider you to be despicable and contemptible, o mighty king. Rather, he hold you to be a mighty king, a renowned king, the king of kings.

Shapur: How can you consider me to be so, as you claim to, seeing that you have the audacity to swear in my presence by God, and not by the gods?

Pusai: I swore by God because I am a Christian; I did not swear by the gods because I am not a pagan.

Shapur: How can you consider me to be king of kings, mighty and powerful, when you have had the effrontery to say in my presence that you are a Christian?<sup>60</sup>

At times a hagiographer will deliberately play on the ambiguity of the term 'king of kings'. Thus the Magian official gives Simeon and his companions a last chance as they are being led off to execution.<sup>61</sup> 'will you worship the sun as a deity and do the will of Shapur, king of kings and lord of all the earth? If so, you will be spared'. 'Indeed we will perform the will of the King of kings and Lord of all the earth', they reply. The official is taken in and the confessors have a good laugh as they point out that the title belongs properly to God and not to Shapur.

Similar deliberate irony is frequently employed in another particularly sensitive area, the Christian ideal of virginity, utterly abhorrent to Zoroastrian religious sensibility. Martha, the daughter of Pusai and another martyr under Shapur II, is told by the interrogating judge: 'you are a young girl, and a very pretty one at

<sup>60</sup> AMS 2 p 214.

<sup>61</sup> *Acts of Simeon* B 83.

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that; go and find a husband, get married and have children; do not hold on to the disgusting pretext of the 'covenant' (that is, vow of virginity). Martha objects: does the law tell a betrothed girl to marry someone other than her fiancé? When pressed to say where this fiancé is, she replies 'he has gone on a long journey on business, but he will soon be back'. She even goes on to give his name, Jesus, but it is only when the Zoroastrian official has asked what city he was visiting and received the reply 'Jerusalem on high' that he realises and bursts out in exasperation, 'did I not say at the outset that this was a stubborn people, not open to persuasion?'.<sup>62</sup>

The logical consequences of the use of bridal imagery are here applied to the individual, rather than to the collective 'People of God', in a way that is entirely typical of early Syriac Christianity as a whole.<sup>63</sup> How deeply ingrained this whole way of thinking was to Christians in Persia can be seen from its extension in the synodical literature to the relationship between bishops and their flocks. In the synod of 554 the transfer of bishops from one see to another is forbidden on the grounds that this is a form of adultery; each bishop's see being 'a pure spiritual wife who has been given to him'.<sup>64</sup>

In Sasanid Iran, then, as far as Christians themselves were concerned, religion and 'national' identity can be said to have coincided, in that the nation concerned was the 'Nation, or People, of God'. This identity successfully cut across – since it transcended—all the various other factors which might have gone to constitute a national identity of the kind that would be recognisable as such to-day—the sense of belonging to the Sasanid state, to a particular region, town, racial or linguistic group. This is not to deny the relevance of these other factors in Sasanian society, and there is certainly some evidence that they did play a role,<sup>65</sup> but it was never an important one as long as religion was considered the ultimate determining factor of allegiance in the structure of the

<sup>62</sup> AMS 2 pp. 236–7. The virgin martyr betrothed to Christ is a theme found in almost all the martyrdoms of women.

<sup>63</sup> It is a recurrent theme in liturgical texts: see H. Engberding, 'Die Kirche als Braut in der ostsyrischen Liturgie', OCP 3 (1937) pp. 5–44.

<sup>64</sup> Canon 5 (SO p. 100); compare also canon 3 (SO p. 99).

<sup>65</sup> It was no doubt among converts from Zoroastrianism that Zoroaster came to be accredited with a prophecy about the birth of Christ and that certain legends were developed around the Magi of the Gospels—see U. Monneret de Villard, *Le leggenda orientali sui Magi evangelici, Studi e Testi*, 163 (Rome 1952).

society, and as long as none of these other groupings—political, geographical, ethnic or linguistic—came to be seen as being co-terminous with that of the religious community.

As far as oriental Christianity is concerned, it is only with the Armenian church that we can witness, possibly already in the pre-Islamic period, the beginnings of a convergence of these two modes of self-identity, in their case of the religious community with the ethnic and linguistic group, both of which cut across the two empires. A hint of this development can perhaps be seen in the extensive use made of the Books of Maccabees by early Armenian historical writers.<sup>66</sup> It is not until the eighth century, however, with the rise of the Bagratid dynasty, that we really find ourselves presented with a recognisable image of Armenian national identity, in Moses Khorenatsi's influential *History of the Armenians*.

In Syriac sources of the Sasanian period 'Armenian' is simply a term to denote a person's geographical provenance, just as 'Aramean' denotes a man from Beth Aramāyē (the area around Seleucia-Ctesiphon),<sup>67</sup> or 'Median' someone from Media. There is, nevertheless, perhaps one area where there was a significant sub-current of local self-identity among Christians (but by no means confined to them): this is to be found in the ecclesiastical provinces of Adiabene (Hadyab) and Beth Garmai, whose metropolitan sees were Arbela and Karka d-Beth Slokh (modern Erbil and Kirkuk in north Iraq).<sup>68</sup> Here there was evidently some continuing awareness of the past Assyrian empire, and the terms *Athor*, *Athorāyē* (Assyria, Assyrians) are sometimes used (in a purely geographical sense)<sup>69</sup> in preference to the names of current administrative usage, whether ecclesiastical or secular. The semi-legendary fourth-century martyr Kardagh, for example, is said to be 'of the stock of the kingdom of the Assyrians', his mother's side going back to Sennacherib; later in the *Acts* we find him made 'prefect of Athor', and Arbela is

<sup>66</sup> See R. W. Thomson, 'The Maccabees in early Armenian historiography', *JTS* ns 26 (1975) pp 329–41. Only passing use of Maccabees is found in Syriac writers (for example *Acts of Simeon A* 2–3, 7–8).

<sup>67</sup> So, for example, in Simeon of Beth Arsham's famous letter concerning the spread of Nestorian doctrines in Persia: ed J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* 1 (Rome 1719) pp 351, 353 (the Latin translation is very misleading). The meaning 'pagan', found in Syriac texts of more westerly provenance, is extremely rare in works written in the Persian empire.

<sup>68</sup> For the contrast between north and south in this respect see P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge 1977) pp 56–60.

<sup>69</sup> In strong contrast to modern usage, for which see below.

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described as 'the capital of the Athorāyē'.<sup>70</sup> This sort of usage indeed occasionally finds its way into official church documents: at the synod of 585 the archdeacon Aba from Arbela signs 'on behalf of Henana, metropolitan of the Athorayē' (the usual terminology is 'of Arbela and the whole region of Adiabene').<sup>71</sup>

A little further south, in Beth Garmai, the local history of Karka d-Beth Slokh starts with Sennacherib's son Sardana and ends with the martyrdoms under Yazdgard II. As a matter of fact there was a liturgical rationale for this, hinted at by the chronicler himself when he goes on to say that it was during Sardana's reign that Jonah preached to the Ninevites:<sup>72</sup> it was a metropolitan of Karka, Sabrisho, who in the late sixth century introduced the pre-Lenten 'Fast of Nineveh' into the calendar of the Church of the East.<sup>73</sup>

In contrast, the Babylonian heritage of further south elicited no such sense of continuity among the Christian community living in south Mesopotamia: indeed one can observe an active dissociation in that the term 'Chaldean' normally designates a pagan astrologer.<sup>74</sup>

Just as membership of the 'People of God' had nothing to do with modern concepts of nationhood, so also it was totally unconnected with any idea of belonging to a particular linguistic group. Christians in the Sasanid empire employed a whole number of different languages for ecclesiastical use.<sup>75</sup> Although we tend to-day to think of Syriac as the cultural language of the Church of the East, during the Sasanian period it was by no means the only one in

<sup>70</sup> *Acts of Kardagh* 3, 5, 6, ed J. B. Abbeloos, *An Bol* 9 (1890) pp 5–106. Nevertheless it is the Iranian element which is uppermost in these acts: see G. Wiessner, 'Christlicher Heiligenkult im Umkreis eines sassanidischen Grosskönigs', in *Festgabe deutscher Iranisten zur 2500 Jahrfeier Irans*, ed W. Eilers (Stuttgart 1971) pp 149–55.

<sup>71</sup> SO p 165.

<sup>72</sup> AMS 2 p 507.

<sup>73</sup> See J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chretienne* 3 (Beirut 1968) pp 20–2. Fiey's hesitations about the date of Sabrisho are unnecessary in the light of the 'Nestorian' edition of the *Hudra* I (Trichur 1960) p 259, where Sabrisho is located in the Persian period—his name is omitted in the uniate *Breviarium Chaldaicum* 1 (Rome 1938) p 161.

<sup>74</sup> In this connection it is significant that almost all the shrines connected with biblical history, such as the monastery of the Ark on mount Kardu and the tomb of Nahum at Alkosh, are situated in the north.

<sup>75</sup> This not unnaturally gave rise to occasional local conflict: according to the *Life of John of Dailam* (Harvard Ms syr. 38 fol 185<sup>r/v</sup>) this seventh-century saint, having founded one monastery, had to build a second one alongside it in order to resolve the quarrel between the Persian and Syriac speaking monks over which language to use in church services.

currency: Greek continued to be the liturgical language of the 'captivity' for a considerable time, while in Persian Armenia Armenian will have replaced Syriac in the fifth century. From the late fifth century onwards Persian became an increasingly important literary vehicle for Christians: of the once extensive Christian literature in this language only a few fragments of biblical and liturgical texts happen to survive to-day,<sup>76</sup> but quite a number of extant Syriac hagiographical, legal and literary texts are in fact translations from lost Middle Persian originals.<sup>77</sup> As the church expanded eastwards, yet other languages were adopted for ecclesiastical use.<sup>78</sup>

One further, and final, point needs to be mentioned in passing: in the sixth and early seventh centuries, as a result of the christological controversies surrounding the council of Chalcedon, the 'People of God' in Persia found themselves torn by internal divisions. Ever since the late fifth century the church in Persia had opted for a distinctive Antiochene theological position,<sup>79</sup> whereas in the sixth century the rest of the Christian world to the west—including supporters of Chalcedon as well as its opponents, the so-called Monophysites—were taking an increasingly Alexandrine stance on christology. One result of this was that, towards the end of the sixth century, the Monophysites began to make considerable inroads into north Mesopotamia, especially in monastic circles. Since, however, each side in effect saw itself as the true 'People of God' and the other as 'heretics',<sup>80</sup> no need was ever felt to alter the basic conceptual model of self identity.

In conclusion, then, one can see how, within the Sasanid empire, the self-identification of Christians as the 'People of God', which had originally been engendered through religious enthusiasm and

<sup>76</sup> See B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford 1977) pp 274–7 and *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 6 (Berlin 1980) under 'Bibelübersetzungen'.

<sup>77</sup> These include the Acts of Aba and of Grigor in Bedjan, *Histoire*: see K. Czeglédy, *Acta Orientalia* 4 (Budapest 1954) p 66.

<sup>78</sup> See W. Hage, 'Einheimische Volkssprachen und syrische Kirchensprache in der nestorianischen Asienmission', in *Erkenntnisse und Meinungen* 2, ed G. Wiessner, *Göttinger Orientforschungen* I.17 (Wiesbaden 1978) pp 131–60.

<sup>79</sup> See W. Macomber, 'The christology of the synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon AD 486', *OCP* 24 (1958) pp 142–54.

<sup>80</sup> In the *Synodicon orientale* the term is first found in the synod of 486 (SO p 54); 'orthodox' now becomes the standard term for one's own side (the first occurrence of 'orthodoxy' is in the synod of 544, SO p 69).

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which had no doubt been further strengthened under the stimulus of persecution, in due course came to be formalised as a result of the way in which church-state relations developed in the Sasanian empire. The situation eventually became fossilised, as it were, under Islam, where membership of a particular religious group served as the overriding means of self-identification. Only when European concepts of nationalism reached the middle east in the late nineteenth century did members of the Church of the East begin to feel the need to discover a national identity that was not solely based on the idea of membership of a religious community. For them a suitable focus was found in the term 'Assyrian',<sup>81</sup> and the resultant Assyrian nationalist movement has to-day even been extended to include members of other churches of Syriac liturgical tradition such as the Syrian Orthodox.<sup>82</sup> Such developments would of course have been unthinkable in Sasanian Iran.

The French Old Testament scholar Antonin Causse once wrote an important study of ancient Israel entitled *Du groupe ethnique à la communauté religieuse* (1937). It would, in my opinion, be sad indeed if a future historian of the Church of the East found himself having to reverse this title.

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<sup>81</sup> For the adoption of this name see J. M. Fiey, "Assyriens" ou "Araméens", *L'Orient Syrien* 10 (Paris 1965) pp 141–60.

<sup>82</sup> See G. Yonan, *Assyriener heute* (Hamburg Vienna 1978); the nationalist-minded among the Syrian Orthodox migrant workers from Turkey, now in western Europe, put out a periodical entitled *Egarto* ('Letter').

"Christians in the Sasanid Empire: a Case of Divided Loyalties," by Sebastian Brock, from *Religion and National Identity. Studies in Church History XVIII* (Oxford, 1982).

The scan was made from the collection of Brock's writings

*Syrian Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Variorum, 1984)

where it appears as as study VI.